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ABSTRACT

A study examined methods for helping students earn their Literacy Passport, mandated for all students by the Virginia Department of Education, prior to entering the ninth grade, beginning in grade 6. Teachers were trained at North Accomack Elementary School (Virginia) in the use and implementation of the writing process and in writing to a prompt. The study used a writing assessment administered to all students in grades 5-8 during each 9-week marking period. To measure progress in writing, a writing predictor test was administered to students in grades 4-5. The results of the test were merged with the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) and a Degrees of Reading Progress Test given in conjunction with the ITBS to predict future results. The results were used as baseline data for the group. Results revealed a significant improvement, with the entire school division improving from 30% scoring above the cut-off score in 1993 to 65% scoring above the cut-off score in 1994. Findings suggest that after training, teachers more effectively taught the key elements needed by students in preparing for the writing test for their Literacy Passport, but more time and training will be required for all teachers to acquire the skills to effectively use the writing process in improving student writing. (CR)

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Case Study:

Program for Improving Writing Skills

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1994

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Running Head: CASE STUDY

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Introduction

North Accomack Elementary School, located in Accomack County, Virginia, houses 827 students in grades K-5. The building was constructed in 1963 for an enrollment of 600 students. Consequently, the school has 13 mobile units located around the perimeter of the building. Certain units are located 25 yards from the nearest entrance door to the main building. Unfortunately, this creates hardships for students housed in these units in cold and inclement weather.

The student population is 57% Black, 38% White, and 5% Hispanic. 71% of the student body receives free or reduced price lunch. North Accomack is a Chapter I target school with 63% of the students eligible for Chapter I services.

The Problem

Beginning with the sixth grade class of 1989, the Virginia Department of Education mandated that all

students must earn a Literacy Passport prior to entering the ninth grade in high school. The test, known as the LPT, was administered to the sixth grade class that year. Students are allowed to retake the test each year until passing it. Also, students will not be eligible to receive a high school diploma until the Literacy Passport is earned. Parksley Middle School, the school fed by North Accomack Elementary, experienced low passing rates for sixth-grade students during the first testing year for the writing test. It became clear that students at North Accomack had to be better prepared to pass the test upon entering grade 6 at Parksley.

Starting in the summer of 1990, a team of teachers were trained in the National Writing Project. In September, these teachers returned to the school division and conducted a series of workshops for teachers in the use and implementation of the writing

process. The writing process stressed that teachers have their students write daily and maintain student writing folders. Over the next two years, writing received increased attention at the division level; continuous follow-ups were instituted through workshops and teacher writing groups. However, passing rates of students in the writing portion of the LPT continued to be low. Through direct observation it was becoming evident that many teachers were not having students write daily and certainly not using prompt writing as a part of the writing process.

Solution

In December, 1992, the opportunity arose to send several teachers to a state-level workshop on scoring prompt writing. The workshop was conducted by consultants from Data Recognition Corporation, the Minnesota-based scoring contractor for the LPT. Teachers returning from the workshop felt more positive

and acquired a greater understanding of what was required for students in writing to a prompt. That summer teachers in grades 4 and 5 were trained in prompt scoring. They, too, responded positively. In conjunction with the workshop training, a decision was made to administer a writing assessment to all students in grades 5-8 during each 9-week marking period. Prompts were selected by central office supervisors from a pool of prompts submitted by teachers. A new prompt was selected for use during each marking period. Each teacher scored his students' prompts. The prompt counted 20% of the students' grade in language arts for the marking period. Also, a division scoring team scored prompts randomly selected from each class. The purpose of the division scoring was to determine if all teachers were assessing student writing within an acceptable range of performance. This process also provided the school division an avenue to determine if

congruency existed among the scoring team scores and the individual teacher's scores assigned to each prompt. Teachers identified as needing improvement were provided assistance and support to improve their skills in teaching writing.

In order to measure progress in writing, a writing predictor test was administered to students in grades 4 and 5 in the spring of 1993 and would continue to be administered yearly. The results of the Writing Predictor were merged with the mathematics component of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) and a Degrees of Reading Progress Test given in conjunction with the ITBS to predict future results. The results were used as baseline data for the group.

During the fall of 1993 and continuing in the winter of 1994, the division writing prompts were administered to the students in grades 4 and 5. The second year administration of the predictor test was in

February, 1994. Receiving a score on the writing prompt that is at or above the cut-off score established by the State indicates a student is making normal progress and should pass the Literacy in grade 6. The results for the baseline group improved significantly. As fourth graders, 25% of the students scored above the cut-off score. As fifth graders, the students formally wrote to a prompt each marking period. When the group was administered the predictor test in February of 1994, 59.2% of the students scored above the cut-off. Also, the entire school division improved from 30% scoring above the cut-off score in 1993, to 65% scoring above the cut-off score in 1994.

Conclusion

The results obtained after one year of the division writing assessment were encouraging. The assessment moved teachers into a mode of regular and effective use of the training received in teaching the

writing process. In addition, we felt there was evidence that teachers more effectively taught the key elements needed by students in preparing for the writing test on the LPT. It will require additional time for all teachers to acquire the skills to effectively use the writing process in improving student writing.

Teachers are generally supportive to the practice of a division writing assessment. Obviously, it placed greater accountability on individual teachers. In charting the results of student scores, there are teachers demonstrating much growth in writing skills of their students. Unfortunately, a few teachers have yet to demonstrate improved writing skills of their students.

Since this year's data serves as a baseline or benchmark, assessment data for next year will begin to show more definite patterns of effective teacher

instruction or the lack of it. Student growth and improvement in writing will improve as teacher instruction in this area improves.